

Chapter 1

The Damnedest Cesspool of Human Misery

Oh, the pity of it.

—Mary Behner, missionary, Scotts Run,
West Virginia (1932)¹

It was 1933. After nearly a decade, the fighting within Scotts Run had finally petered out. A reporter from the *Christian Century*, Charles R. Joy, had been sent to observe conditions in the area. He watched as a coal train rumbled slowly past a row of derelict cabins, abandoned and silent, like many of the coal mines spread in the hills around and above. The train, its cars piled high with coal, screeched to a halt.

A sudden burst of ragged families rushed out of the cabins and pounced on the immobile train. After climbing up the sides of the cars,

they tossed coal out onto the ground as fast as they could. By the time the train left six minutes later (per Mr. Joy's timepiece), the coal in the railcars were no longer piled high, but concave.

"I suppose it is awful for us to be doing this, but if we didn't do it, we'd freeze," explained one woman to the incredulous reporter.² What he witnessed must have seemed straight out of a Charles Dickens novel, but by the early 1930s, it was a scene repeated from one end of the hollow to the other. Sidney D. Lee, who grew up in Scotts Run, recalled that "in 1926, purchased coal cost at least \$3 a ton" from the local stores,³ far out of many families' reach. For them, scrounging for coal was a necessary part of surviving West Virginia's harsh winters, and children throughout the Run ran to whatever lumps fell off the passing trains, to bring them home for burning.

The reports of what happened not only in northern West Virginia but also throughout America's coal-mining areas are all the more heart-breaking to read because they become so monotonous. It was a tragedy that, like the world war that caused it, need not have happened at all yet surfed all the way to the sand on a wave breaking beautifully from end to end, powered by ignorance, envy, money, and greed for power. Signed by the miners' union and the coal operators in 1924, the supremely foolish Jacksonville Agreement was the signal for Scotts Run to begin its share in the suffering.

The agreement had within it two fatal flaws and, in retrospect, you wonder how anyone could have missed them. First, it assumed that wage rates from the 1922 contract, set when coal was in high demand and prices were solid, could continue to be used as a rational pay scale in the face of both declining demand and falling prices. Second, the ability of nonunion operators to adjust their labor costs on a dime provided them a distinct pricing advantage that union mines could not hope to match. A man with a family would always, without fail, buy coal that was both lower priced and of better quality; and to him, whether it was mined by union labor or not was beside the point.

With both the demand and the price for coal in decline, it was only a short time, practically before the ink on the contract was dry, that "in a desperate attempt to stay solvent the northern operators abrogated

the Jacksonville Agreement,”⁴ an act that was the Sarajevo* for Scotts Run. It would trigger hostilities and mark a radical departure from the area’s past experience, as this strike would be vastly more violent than anything seen before.⁵

While the fighting that was to erupt in Scotts Run did not provide battles on the scale of Blair Mountain or spectacular shoot-outs like Matewan, it would not finally end until 1932, eight years later, and the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) strike that ended in 1931 made it the longest labor dispute in West Virginia history.⁶ Scotts Run was a low-burning conflict, as the soldier-scholars like to say, a long, drawn-out war of attrition.

As always, history provides us with an expert’s glowing report on the state of affairs, uttered the moment before the ship hit the iceberg. This one belongs to noted geologist I. C. White, who wrote during the summer of 1923, “The Scotts Run field has one distinction that is unique in its own way; union and non-union mines have been working peaceably, almost side by side, since the settlement of the strike last summer.”⁷ The end of this Eden would take the miners and their families into a crushing poverty that would literally remove the clothes from their backs and the very shoes from their children’s feet, and throw them “into destitution and misery, and many of the operators into bankruptcy.”⁸

But Scotts Run was not always a tragedy.

The Great Coal Bubble

The coal boom was the first and last high mark for the industry on Scotts Run.

—Professor Ronald L. Lewis, West Virginia University (1994)⁹

It had long been common knowledge that the area of Scotts Run was stuffed to bursting with coal underneath. As early as 1836, a geologist named William Barton Rogers led a team into the area, reporting back

*The Serbian city where, during 1914, the Austro-Hungarian Army’s inspector general, the archduke Franz Ferdinand, had his trip cut short by getting assassinated, thereby triggering World War I.

that it possessed “several fine beds of coal”;¹⁰ his words would turn out to be one of history’s great understatements. Scotts Run had more than a few fine beds of coal—it was estimated in the early 1920s that it had about 3.7 billion tons underneath¹¹—and the field is still being mined to this day.

The area surrounding Morgantown had eight coal seams in the immediate vicinity, giving it, in the opinion of geologist White “the unique distinction of having more coal . . . than any other city in the world.”¹² While White did have a bit of an interest in excessive cheerleading, as he himself was invested in those coalfields, it has to be granted how difficult it would have been to exaggerate the riches that Scotts Run seemed to dangle before any would-be businessman.

Scotts Run itself is part of the larger Fairmont Field, and had lying under it five massive coal beds that White designated “the Monongahela series”;¹³ the Pittsburgh, Redstone, Sewickley, Uniontown, and Waynesburg. Not all of them turned out to be economically viable to extract; as one contemporary recorded, “the Waynesburg seam proved unprofitable to mine.”¹⁴ Luckily, two seams in particular, the Pittsburgh and Sewickley, would prove to be mother lodes.

The Pittsburgh seam was “considered by many experts to be the most valuable mineral deposit in the world”¹⁵ and had lying about 90 feet above it the Sewickley, which was for a time the Rolls-Royce of coal. Preferred by many for its characteristics when burned, farmers in particular took to it as it “burned like wood.”¹⁶ The Sewickley had “from a fuel viewpoint such marked and extraordinary qualities”¹⁷ as would give Scotts Run coal its premier reputation, and many of the finest, high-end “limited” trains in the world would use nothing but Sewickley to power their engines.¹⁸

It is said that the first railcar loaded with coal on Scotts Run was at the Madsville Mine on July 8, 1914, and “the biggest individual factor in building up this great industry was the construction of the railroads.”¹⁹ The man who wrote those words was incorrect—more than anything, it was World War I and the war machine’s insatiable demand for the coal that built up the industry to its highest highs, before sending it all smashing to the ground.

Historian Ronald L. Lewis stated his opinion that “World War One unleashed the pivotal chain of events,”²⁰ and doesn’t war always? There

is no greater way to seemingly stimulate an economy than war, for making everyone get frantic to work, and combined with the easy money provided through America's newly reborn central bank, the industrial development in Scotts Run went into a speculative frenzy.

What happened in the coal fields outside of Morgantown, West Virginia, was nothing more or less than a tragedy, brought on by the artificial stimulus of war. Coal was in heavy demand in wartime America as it was vital to feed a booming weapons sector. The country became manic busy making things that explode, all to be shipped overseas to help the good people of Europe prolong the slaughter. In World War I, this was what allies were for, and come 1917, Woodrow Wilson's fondest wish came true and Congress agreed to send American boys into Europe's charnel house.

From a mere 400,000 tons as late as 1914, the amount of coal extracted annually from the coal fields of Monongalia County exploded upward to 2.9 million tons by 1920.²¹ In a rapid transformation that seemed to have taken place overnight, Scotts Run's gradual change from a farming community to an industrialized mining center was put into overdrive, and it "became one of West Virginia's greatest industrial districts."²² This hyperjump in demand for coal from the hollow overwhelmed the available rail lines, and on the "uneven, poorly ballasted roadbed . . . wrecks were frequent."²³

The Run took on the physical features that later observers would remark on—it became a five-mile-long, narrow hollow stuffed with homes, people from both near and far, stores, and churches, and, in a long line as if soldiers at parade, the coal tipples* stood from end to end.²⁴ The war seemed a positive benefit to those in the hollow, providing jobs for many and coal dust for all. Scotts Run was industrialized to an extent unseen in any other hollow in West Virginia, if not in the country.²⁵

Chasing after the profits offered by government purchase agents, operators and workers all flocked to the Run. Large and small operators sprouted like mushrooms.²⁶ While the Lever Act was passed in the summer of 1917, leading to price controls on the industry, coal still could be sold at \$2.53 per ton in 1918 and in the spot market (for

*Structures from which coal can be loaded onto railcars for shipment.

immediate delivery) at \$14 per ton. All this was from a price of 97 cents per ton in 1916.²⁷

The coal boom caused the value of land in the Run to skyrocket. There are on record properties whose value rose from \$6 in 1913 to around \$2,000 during the war.²⁸ Land was not the only thing to see its price skyrocket—labor enjoyed a munificence that was only a dream during peacetime. Although government price setters had decreed a \$5 minimum daily wage for miners, at the height of the coal bubble, “a miner might earn as much as \$25 a day.”²⁹

Wages of \$12 to \$15 a day were common, and a newly christened coal miner after only a short period of time “received wages far in excess of the modest salaries paid to college professors” at the nearby West Virginia University.³⁰

Like many a businessman, the workers who flocked en masse to the Run, lured by high wages, found the entire boom hard to understand yet took it for granted. Although wages far above what they could have earned just a short time earlier should have been a warning that it all could not last, many behaved as if it always would. A few decades later, looking back on it all, a writer for *Harper's Magazine* said of them, “of the majority that that peculiarly American observation may be made: they couldn't stand prosperity.”³¹

Even the *New York Times* (usually so understanding in these matters) took the miners to task for their profligate behavior toward this bounty, declaring “a coal loader made \$20 to \$40 a day. He bought silk shirts and wore them underground.”³² As icing on the cake, while 60,000 men were taken from West Virginia and inducted into the war machine, coal miners were specifically exempted from the draft.

Moving now into the picture, during the war the coal miners' union, the UMWA, won recognition from the federal government as the miners' agent.³³ Using as a lever a government concerned above all with maximizing war production and keeping labor quiet, the union forced its way into the coal fields despite an industry traditionally reluctant to accept it.

Union membership, traditionally moribund in West Virginia, exploded from 6,000 in 1914 to 53,000 by the war's end. The southern West Virginian coal fields, though, maintained their long resistance to such measures and remained for the most part free of unionism.

To be a Scotts Run coal miner during the war meant that times were good, yet just over the horizon waited something else, and when it arrived times would never be so good again.

The Hell of Peace

From the end of World War One until the early 1920s, Scotts Run was the marvel of the industry . . . the intensity of its rise was matched by its rapid and extended fall.

—Phil Ross, historian (1994)³⁴

For a few years after the armies disbanded and marched home, the boom in Scotts Run continued to sound off loud. The happy miners and coal operators had yet to learn that war demands from all who participate that they, too, share its misery and suffering, but in the early 1920s the signs were easy to ignore.

More important to the long-run health of the coal industry, and therefore to Scotts Run and all who lived and worked in it, was the awakened appetite among federal employees to intervene in the coal industry. Although the early 1920s were still a time when the American people were far less willing to bow before political control than today, the war had introduced the government decree to business owners, and it was only natural that the powerful in Washington, DC, wished to continue to flex their newly found muscle.

It was not until 1922, *three* years after the guns fell silent, that President Warren G. Harding would finally lift federal regulation of the industry, yet before that time others in Washington would look to place their stamp onto how the coal industry was run.

In early 1921, the Republican senator from New York, William M. Calder, charged that the coal industry was making “excessive profits,” specifically in the year 1920, and introduced a bill that would have allowed the Department of Commerce (then under President Herbert Hoover) to force the coal operators to reveal any statistical information on prices, production, and profit that a federal employee demanded.³⁵ As the chairman of the Senate Reconstruction Committee, Senator Calder had previously threatened the entire industry with

nationalization as the coal operators had “failed to reduce prices adequately”³⁶ per his demands.

The coal companies had used the emergency of war to make a deal with the devil, and while that deal guaranteed them easy profit and labor peace, it came at the price of their freedom. In 1921, a great admirer of the wartime industrial codes, Republican senator William S. Kenyon from Iowa, began to agitate for a peacetime industrial code over the entire coal industry. He openly wished for a “code of principles for the determination of industrial disputes.”³⁷

Neither of these proposals would attain the status of law, but the coal operators were conditioned to walk softly around federal politicians, and this was to have negative consequences for all, especially in the aftermath of Herbert Hoover’s disastrous meddling that led to the Jacksonville Agreement of 1924.

For now, although the end of the war did lead to declining demand for coal from other mined fields, Scotts Run continued to expand, bucking the trend due to the superiority of the area’s coal as “the Sewickley seam’s suitability as a steam fuel”³⁸ kept business humming. The year 1921 would prove to be a very good one; the violence between the coal operators and miners in the southern West Virginian coal fields pushed production north to Scotts Run, sending annual output in Monongalia County from 2.9 million tons in 1920 to 4.4 million tons in 1921.³⁹

Rail freight traffic reflected the continued good times, with the average number of railcars sent out of the Run to shipping points on its east end rising from 175 per day to an average of about 200 per day between 1921 and 1924.⁴⁰ The average price received for a ton of Scotts Run coal in 1921 hovered around \$4.65; although well below the market price of \$14 per ton brought on by the war, it was still above the price (\$2.53 per ton) decreed by government fiat during the conflict.⁴¹

The coal industry publication the *Black Diamond* from that time notes that, if given steady work, a hand loader in the mines of the Run could earn \$168 per two weeks, or more than \$4,000 per year, while a machine operator working the same hours could earn over \$6,700 per year.⁴² (About \$50,000 and \$84,000, respectively, in 2009 U.S. dollars.) In jarring contrast to what relief workers would encounter when they ventured into the wreckage of all this during the early

1930s, in the early 1920s, you could find “company towns that were clean and well maintained, with sturdy houses, paved streets, bowling alleys, and a theater.”⁴³

An article from 1923 points specifically to the Gilbert-Davis mines as a fine example of company-provided housing, with “electric lights, water, and modern conveniences.”⁴⁴ With the price of coal high enough so that workers were able to produce sufficient revenue to pay for such amenities, life in the better coal camps along the Run was good.

At the peak of the coal boom, which reached its plateau in the years from 1922 to 1924, Scotts Run attained the height of its industrialization and had about three dozen or so mines operated by scores of companies large and small, from the well established to the fly by night operators.⁴⁵ The total capacity of the area could produce “536 cars, hauling 26,800 tons per day.”⁴⁶

Although 1924 was forecast to be another banner year for the Run, it was actually the beginning of the end. Efficiency gains in coal-burning trains and electrical plants combined with the rise of auto travel to lessen demand for coal, while the rising use of mechanization in the mines and its displacement of labor helped spark within Scotts Run the violence so common in the surrounding coal fields. It would knock the hollow from the pinnacle of an all-too-brief golden age. All of Monongalia County would see demand of over 9 million tons in 1926; by 1932, that number would plunge to 5 million tons, and that plunge would take the miners of Scotts Run into an abyss of misery.⁴⁷

The opening ceremony for this plunge was the Jacksonville Agreement signed between the coal operators and UMWA officials in 1924.

The Agreement That Wasn't

The consumers, by their behavior in the market, are the ones who indirectly determine prices and wages.

—Ludwig von Mises, economist (1941)⁴⁸

As 1924 approached, no less a person than future President Herbert Hoover, continuing the newly formed habit of political meddling

in the coal industry, brokered an agreement on a new contract between the coal operators and the union. Designed to bring a modicum of labor peace to West Virginia, the resulting Jacksonville Agreement, like many a plan throughout history, would have the exact opposite effect of what was intended.

Calvin Coolidge once famously remarked about Herbert Hoover (whom he referred to derisively as “Wonder Boy”) “that man has offered me unsolicited advice for six years, all of it bad.”⁴⁹ If only the men gathered for the coal negotiations at Jacksonville, Florida, had felt the same way as Coolidge, a great deal of violence, bad blood, and trouble could have been prevented. Of his many blunders, the Jacksonville Agreement he brokered between the coal operators and the UMWA in 1924 ranks as one of his most destructive.

During the war, federal politicians granted to the United Mine Workers of America the designation as speaker for all miners and “refereed” the Washington Agreement between the union and the coal operators.* At a minimum of \$5-per-day wages, the workers were happy, and despite the fact that government officials declared the power to arbitrarily set coal prices, the owners were satisfied because they did so at a level that “virtually guaranteed operators handsome profits,” so much so that “even marginal operators profited handsomely during the war.”⁵⁰ Everyone was making out like bandits, except for the taxpayer—but this was of no concern to anyone involved. As any reading of history will tell you, when matters such as these are decided, the taxpayer never counts for much.

Unfortunately for the miners, all the inflation engineered by the central bank was eroding the value of their new wages; their cost of living rose at a 64 percent clip within the four-year period of 1914 to 1918.⁵¹ At the annual union convention in September 1918, the membership demanded a wage hike to account for the debasement of the U.S. dollar. Not getting any satisfaction, in November 1919 they began a nationwide strike.⁵²

Scotts Run miners refused to join in the strike and continued to work under police protection. Within six weeks, the striking miners

* Come to an agreement or we’ll “nationalize” your property, they said to the coal operators, and by all accounts this was a very persuasive argument.

grabbed for themselves a 14 percent wage increase, and a federal commission piled on another 27 percent soon thereafter. These actions, combined with aggressive union recruitment in the hollow, convinced many a miner that being union was not such a bad deal after all.⁵³

This postwar agreement remained in effect for two years, from April 1920 until April 1922. Although the severe depression of 1920–1921 saw coal prices collapse by half, during negotiations in early 1922, union officials started off by demanding that wages for their members remain unchanged at \$7.50 per day.⁵⁴ It was going to be a long negotiation process.

The year 1923 did not bring any relief to the industry, as nonunion coal came online with “a lower cost and often higher quality product.”⁵⁵ Despite a further fall in coal prices to between \$1.15 and \$2.00 per ton and “the smokeless coals enter[ing] northern markets at even lower prices,”⁵⁶ as the year drew to a close, Hoover (Secretary of Commerce at the time) corralled the coal companies into signing the Jacksonville Agreement, which “maintained the 1922 wage scale.”⁵⁷ Even more inexplicably, the contracts were to last until 1927. Unfortunately for the happy union members, most had just priced themselves out of a job.

According to one historian, “it was something of a tightrope walk for the industry to increase wages and prices but to remain competitive against other energy sources”⁵⁸ and it was a walk most could not make. Besides the competition from gas, diesel, and oil, the nonunion coal mines, with wages up to 35 percent lower, could provide consumers with coal at a far lower price.⁵⁹

The Jacksonville Agreement did nothing more than drive union coal operators into bankruptcy and throw thousands of union coal miners out of work. It was a contract based on the same foolish policy—to never allow the price of labor to adjust downward even when necessary—that Hoover would push all over again from 1930 to 1932 with equally disastrous results. It had been lamented in the *Black Diamond* as early as 1922 that “there is no effort to go into the economics of the coal industry” whenever efforts were made to negotiate labor peace.⁶⁰ That should be the epitaph carved into Hoover’s gravestone. Why the coal operators agreed to it in the first place is beyond rational explanation. They looked to break it before the ink had even dried.

Why UMWA president John L. Lewis happily agreed to the unchanged pay scale is a bit obvious, and it is also telling about the type of man he was that he knew and *hoped* it would throw over 200,000 miners out of work.⁶¹ He was also banking on continued political pressure in favor of his union—for instance, in his push to have the Interstate Commerce Commission revise rail freight scales by political decree to favor union-mined coal.⁶²

By its very nature, a union that makes economically irrational demands cannot succeed but by the use of force, and Lewis, a big player in Washington's political salons, was well aware of this. He realized that he was demanding wages out of line with what consumers were willing to pay for coal and that nonunion workers, more than willing to sell their labor for wages in line with prevailing economic conditions, could (and did) price his men right out of their jobs. To meet the goals demanded by the UMWA, lower-priced competition had to be legally forbidden and consumers forced to pay a higher price, things possible only by the use of political force. It was not until the New Deal instituted those very policies that the UMWA could claim victory in the coal fields.

The UMWA was more than willing to use political means to obtain an advantage even over fellow unionists. On July 26, 1926, Van A. Bittner, the union representative in the Scotts Run area, sent a cable to Secretary of Labor James J. Davis urging him to "investigate reports that members of the International Workers of the World (I.W.W.)" were mucking about in the Run, riling up the coal miners with their anarchist, socialist poison. "Our union will not tolerate their interference," he insisted.⁶³

When John Brophy ran against Lewis for union president in 1926, he was far less subtle about the necessity of political power to meet their goals than Lewis ever was. Brophy's platform explicitly called for politicians to nationalize all the coal mines.⁶⁴ He lost, and Lewis managed to hold onto his position, but the union was rapidly shrinking under the weight of his refusal to acknowledge economic reality.

Lewis's continued demand for real wages that were out of proportion to what the market could bear were causing union mines to shut or severely reduce operations. In four years (from 1924 to 1927), the fields where the UMWA membership was strongest—in Pennsylvania,

Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois—"lost 44 million of yearly production" by consumers flocking to buy coal from nonunion mines in Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia, which "picked up 51 million ton."⁶⁵

One of the clearest moments of bluntly spoken truth occurred during 1927 and was delivered by an exasperated southern Ohio coal operator to a group of striking miners. It deserves to be quoted at length. All the words in italics in it are from whatever unknown man once wrote them:

Your officials say *You Men* instructed them to refuse a competitive scale. That means that *You Men* have forced your mines to cease operations, and have *Given Away Our Trade and Lost Your Own Jobs to Favor West Virginia and the Non-union fields.*⁶⁶

The destruction of the union mine operators, shackled into guaranteed losses by inflexible wage scales, and the flow of miners to nonunion mines that were still open caused UMWA membership rolls to collapse almost into nonexistence by the end of the 1920s. The union had seen its strength fall from 50,000 in 1922 to a microscopic 600 at decade's end.⁶⁷ By then the UMWA was virtually unknown "in most of the important fields."⁶⁸

By late 1924, the unionized coal mines were consistently running in the red; during November, coal operator Joseph Pursglove, who had extensive interest in Scotts Run, informed an unmoved John L. Lewis that "all the men who are operating union coal mines are going bankrupt."⁶⁹ Early 1925 saw "infinitesimal demand," and in response to coal operators who sold out their interests to other coal operators (who in turn would reopen the same mines as nonunion shops), Van A. Bittner, the UWMA representative in the Scotts Run area, called for a general strike to begin, fittingly, on April Fool's Day "in an effort to force restoration of the Jacksonville wage agreement."⁷⁰ Some union operators responded by simply closing their operations entirely. Within a few weeks, 2,240 miners had lost their jobs.⁷¹

Toward summer, the Gilbert-Davis mines announced they were voiding their contract with the union and withdrawing from the Jacksonville Agreement. Soon after, three of their coal tipples along Scotts Run were destroyed by fire. The company was only partially

insured for the loss—which shows how badly its balance sheet was bleeding.

Even worse for all parties involved, “investigators determined that arson was the cause of the fire.”⁷² By now no one could deny that West Virginia’s long history of labor violence in the coal fields had at last made its way into the area. The UMWA strike “triggered another bloody labor conflict.”⁷³ The effects of World War I were now to hit home in Scotts Run, the Jacksonville Agreement marked the bursting of the hollow’s coal bubble, later than elsewhere but with just as much suffering. The Run was now to enter a years-long period of misery, want, and labor violence that would earn it the nickname “Bloody Run.”

The sad part of it all was that the violence was for nothing and utterly futile; the UMWA was fighting for control of something—a price—that is not tangible and no law can affect. Prices are a derivative of people’s opinion as to what something is worth to them at a certain point in time, glimpses of an ever-changing mental state. You can throw all the law books and police at it as you can gather, and all you do is strengthen and delay the inevitable snapback, the time when people start ignoring the powerful and allow their opinions to roam free again.

The kings of any free market, always and everywhere, are the consumers, the ones who decide how much they are willing to pay for whatever you are offering. They determine everything, including how much the people who labor to provide that good get paid. Highlighting the absurdity of all the fighting (and to prove that God has a sense of humor) is the fact that the only ones ever to figure this out was the small communist rump of a union (the National Miners Union, or NMU). They went on strike in 1931 to protest *consumers*, to decry their unwillingness to pay a higher price for coal.⁷⁴ That strike was as futile as any other, but at least it showed some understanding on the NMU’s part of what it was up against.

The UMWA was fighting for higher wages against the winds of progress, competition, and most of all the sovereign consumer’s willingness and ability to be better served elsewhere. The days of frenzied war production and high demand were over, the slack-jawed dumb spend-

thrift government procurement agent was no longer knocking at their door with fistfuls of Other People's Money—and the union stubbornly refused to see it. The UMWA's insane refusal to acknowledge what was apparent to everyone else—that the coal industry was rapidly contracting in a postbubble period—must be laid at the feet of the men who ran the show, and front and center was most assuredly UMWA president John L. Lewis. Amazingly, and this is truly a testament to the man's political skill, despite his disastrous leadership, he managed to maintain his grip on the union all the way until 1960, and this only after being saved from the consumer by FDR's New Deal and World War II.

The UMWA, in the end, did far more harm than good for the miners of West Virginia. By encouraging the miners under their leadership to fight for wages they knew to be economically unviable, they instantly guaranteed a violent clash between the operators and the miners, with artificially high levels of unemployment thrown into the bargain. The mine operators and the shoddy treatment of their workforce made the situation even more emotionally charged.

Many have asked over the years why the unemployed miners simply did not pack up and leave, to go in search of work elsewhere. More than anything it was the widely noted, fraudulent, and blatantly illegal policy of the coal companies paying their workers not in money but in round brass discs that passed for company script that strongly argues that some operators had their miners in a virtual form of bondage, immobilized by both isolation and company money of no value outside the camp area.

It was here, to right this wrong, that the UMWA should have concentrated its primary effort. A victory would have granted far more miners the ability to leave the camps when things went downhill, freed them from bondage to the company store. Instead, stranded by lack of money and bereft (because of union wage demands) of any job at all, the miners bore the brunt of the bursting bubble; they were, literally, sitting ducks.

Those who were to suffer the most from all this were, at least in the beginning, pulled from their mountainside farms into Scotts Run as they sold out that hardscrabble existence for the relative abundance of coal mining.

Now, their farms a distant, hazy memory, they lived among the foul-smelling, smoking slag piles,* their deteriorating company shacks perched high and wretched, clinging to the sides of the steep hollows. In the mountains all round them empty black holes that once were teeming coal mines sat quiet and cold, while just to the east the gleaming lights of Morgantown, with its office buildings, restaurants, and paved roads, shone bright fewer than 10 miles and an unreachable universe away.

Yet before the trap was snapped closed by the bursting coal bubble, there followed on the heels of the West Virginia mountain folk a wave of foreigners, mostly of Eastern Europe stock, pulled into the local labor pool by high wages and accompanied by a flow of black Americans, fleeing the internal terror of Jim Crow for the relative safety of northern West Virginia.

By the time ink was put to the Jacksonville Agreement, all the victims had been gathered in the hollow for the tragedy of Scotts Run to begin. For Scotts Run, finally, the Coal Wars had arrived.

Scotts Run Turns Bloody

If you haven't got enough to eat go out and take it. There are not enough state police or yellow dogs in West Virginia to stop the army of the United Mine Workers of America.

—Van A. Bittner, UMW boss, West Virginia (1932)⁷⁵

It was a busy day for the law officers who worked Scotts Run. The *Washington Post* next day (this was in November 1924) gave a rundown on page two outlining just how busy the Run had become. To start off, in the aftermath of a fight at the Diamond Coal Company mine, eight union and one nonunion miner were charged with attempted homicide and inciting a riot. “Four of the prisoners had bullet wounds,”⁷⁶ the paper dutifully noted.

Gunfire had become frequent enough throughout the hollow for the inevitable noncombatant casualties to crop up, and this day's victim

* A slag pile is a collection of refuse from coal mining. The coal in them frequently ignites and burns.

was “five year old Susan Rock, who was struck in the chest by a stray bullet, [and] is in critical condition.” The same issue announced that “county authorities” were offering a \$2,500 award (about \$32,600 in 2009 dollars)⁷⁷ for any information leading to the arrest of whoever dynamited one of Shriver Coal Company’s tipples to the ground.⁷⁸

The quick death of the Jacksonville Agreement ushered into the Run a time of “evictions, tent colonies and barracks, injunctions, shootings, dynamiting, and arrests of miners and deputies,” and it all added up to a “sense of turmoil.”⁷⁹ One of the most potent and widely used weapons on the union side was dynamite and sabotage rather than widescale open battle. This was an intelligent strategy, as the crushing union defeats at Matewan and Blair Mountain proved that open assault on coal operator property would be met by a far more potent, well-funded force.

In one of many examples to choose from, it was reported that on August 1, 1926, a large dynamite blast erupted in Scotts Run near a barracks holding mostly black nonunion miners.⁸⁰ But of all the atrocities one man can visit on another, the most surprising claim from history is that of union-led sabotage against nonunion coal mines—while the nonunion coal miners were still in them. If true, it would highlight the desperate, vicious nature of the Coal Wars. For one group of coal miners to deliberately put another group into danger would seem to be the ultimate taboo, the ultimate breach of trust within a profession.

During the war’s early stages, there were suspicious mining disasters on at least three occasions in the northern coal fields. On March 17, 1925, one in Barrackville, Marion County erupted, “completely destroying the mine”⁸¹ and leaving at least 35 men dead. Also in Marion County, 19 died when the mine at Farmington exploded. And in the worst of the three, at a mine owned by the New England Fuel and Transportation Company in Everettville, Monongalia County, 97 men (the majority were African American and nonunion⁸²) perished in a horrific blast. For the first two, “circumstances strongly confirmed the suspicions of the operators” that it was union led sabotage.⁸³

As for the last, Howard Burton Lee, the Attorney General for West Virginia from 1925 to 1933, arrived on the scene, where he observed “that snarling animal hatred felt by members of the miners’ union for

non-union miners.” He watched as the striking miners and their families openly mocked and cursed the grief and panic-stricken wives and children of the nonunion miners who waited sadly for their man’s corpse to be carried to the surface.

Sidney D. Lee, who grew up in Scotts Run, recalled that “one of the sad consequences of a person being accused of being a scab* was that his family could suffer both physically and emotionally. Coal miners often became violent . . . I recall kids of a non-union miner being beaten severely by the children, usually bigger, of a union miner.”⁸⁴

All the rage was misdirected and pointless, as the coal companies could pay only what the market could bear, and the market could not bear the demands of the striking union men. During 1927 ongoing wage negotiations in Miami, Florida, came to naught as, “the coal men refused to reinstate the Jacksonville Scale.”⁸⁵ Eighty million tons of inventory was already stockpiled by coal consumers, demand was forecast to be poor again, and the fact that the coal men were even talking about something so absurd as to pay a wage scale from the boom year of 1922 suggests that the UMWA leadership was actually insane enough to have bought it up.

“Wages fell to less than the 1917 levels for miners as coal dropped well below break even levels for the operators,”⁸⁶ and still the UMWA leadership insisted on the 1922 scale. Many union mines had simply closed or sold out to other coal operators, who reopened on a nonunion basis. All of Scotts Run was completely nonunion after 1927, yet another monumental failure on the part of John L. Lewis.

Mines opened and just as quickly closed, companies surfaced and went under like a cork in rough water; the violence ebbed and flowed until want and destitution took up residence in the hollow. Hungry, cold, and despondent, the mining population hunkered down like residents of a city under siege. Years later, the daughter of a famous Scotts Run missionary damned the coal companies, asking “how could they turn away from what they were creating out there?”⁸⁷ Yet her anger, like that of the ones blowing up the coal tipples, was misdirected. Why would businessmen deliberately sink their own ship? The endless strikes were a series of “gestures of despair rather than considered attempts to

* A nonunion coal miner.

force concessions from those able to grant them,”⁸⁸ according to a *New York Times* reporter. It was certainly not the doings of the coal operators who brought the coal industry low and the miners, and the operators too, into such dire economic straits.

The coal operators were no colder or warmer, no more or less human than the lowest hand loader; they were struggling with the same economic forces that the miners were. They could pay their employees only what the market price of coal could cover. During the war in the Run, “the best intentioned employees found it difficult to pay a living wage and remain in business.”⁸⁹ Even such publications as the *Christian Century*, usually critical of businessmen, granted “the best-meaning employers are unable to pay anything but starvation wages.” The striking miners were in a hopeless situation.

As 1926 rolled past, 750,000 men were employed in the coal-mining regions, a region that just a scant time before had supported barely a fraction of that number. By 1927, it is estimated that one-third of them were out of work.⁹⁰ Far too many men were chasing after jobs in a postbubble industry. During the 1920s, it was estimated that a quarter million men left the coal industry, “went back to the farm or into other industries.”⁹¹ The men who remained behind watched as wages continued to fall along with coal prices, mines closed, and violent action, pointless and irrational, took the place of calm, deliberate thought.

A new term came to be applied to those left behind, “stranded,” meaning a group of people whose livelihood depended on one major employer or industry now collapsed. As late as 1934, contemporary writers estimated this “stranded” population to number between 300,000 and 500,000 miners and their families.⁹²

By 1932, annual coal production in Monongalia County had dropped to 5 million tons, and come April 1933, approximately 41 percent of the population was on relief with the harder-hit areas spiking to 64 percent. “In some coal camps, virtually the entire population was out of work.”⁹³

To protest the lowest wage level since 1913,⁹⁴ in May 1931, the miners in Scotts Run, for the most part the same ones who had taken jobs as scabs back during the strikes of 1925, themselves went out on strike.⁹⁵ In the long line of similarly hopeless strikes, where desperate

men made impossible demands, this one would be different. It would finally, seven years after it began, bring the labor strike in Scotts Run to an end. Likely it did not seem that way at the time.

Then John L. Lewis and the UMWA caught two lucky breaks. The miners walked out on their own, without union leadership. That vacuum was soon filled when Van A. Bittner saw his chance and persuaded the former scabs to join the union. Then the coal operators, seeing the local communist-backed NMU stage its own strike, were filled with visions of themselves and their families dangling from hammers and sickles and promptly rushed to the UMWA and officially recognized it as the miners' voice. For the first time in seven years, the operators and the union were dating again.

The union agreement that was signed in June 1931 was notable in that the UMWA, this time, was willing to compromise on the wage scale; the one agreed to, at 30 cents a ton (or \$3.60 a day), was less than half of the old Jacksonville Agreement (63 cents a ton). Even more notable, the agreement mandated a union wage scale less than the one prevailing in the area at the time for nonunion mines. Four mines in the area, all nonunion, were paying from 38 to 43 cents a ton.⁹⁶ Bittner defended the wage level, explaining that, since the nonunion mines did not use union men to weigh the miners' output, they were actually paying about 30 cents a ton after accounting for their cheating.⁹⁷

At first the fighting continued, and "during 1931 Scotts Run experienced sporadic violence, marked by machine gun fire and sniping"⁹⁸ with the union targeting mines with nonunion workers. Mine operator James Paisley was a favorite target, and UMWA pickets appeared at his work sites looking to force the mine to be unionized. In June 1932, guards at his mines opened fire on a crowd of strikers, killing one and wounding nine. Charges against all parties from both sides were dropped.⁹⁹

But for the most part, the fighting in the Run dropped off, yet "the end of the seven year coal war did not bring a return of prosperity."¹⁰⁰ The underlying economics of the situation were exactly the same, whether people shot at each other or not, and by 1932, the additional weight of the Great Depression pushed the people of Scotts Run even deeper into misery and hunger.

Although public relief had been provided by local charity organizations for years, “its effect had chiefly been to increase the inertia of the recipients.”¹⁰¹ Where hope had once been there was now nothing, and those who had stayed rather than leave in the late 1920s saw no escape. With no hope, they seemed simply to wait for whatever fate would bring.

The conditions that the larger outside world recorded in the early 1930s when it finally noticed what had been happening in the coal-mining region—and in Scotts Run in particular—were on a par with the worst slums the world could provide, in their time and ours.

Bottom of the Barrel: Life in the Coal Camps

How small one's worries seem in comparison to what so many human beings have been through.

—Eleanor Roosevelt (1933)¹⁰²

For the people jammed into Scotts Run, the Great Depression started years prior to late 1929.¹⁰³ Glenna Williams, who grew up in the hollow before her family's resettlement in Arthurdale, remembered that, “we felt the Great Depression long before Wall Street.”¹⁰⁴ A young Bob McLaughlin Sr., who moved into Arthurdale at the age of 10 from Harmony Grove (a town right outside of Scotts Run), had never known anything but poverty or imagined anything else: “We thought everybody lived like us.”¹⁰⁵

Some lived a little bit better than others; some lived a little bit worse, many felt pangs of hunger at one time or another. Throughout the country's mining regions thousands of miners and their families could be found huddled together hungry and destitute, living in tattered tents or squatting in abandoned company shacks, the owner having long ago slipped into bankruptcy.¹⁰⁶ The camps themselves, almost without exception, were “ugly, disease-infested slums.”¹⁰⁷

Although contemporary observations of life in those camps are, in this instance, primarily from the Scotts Run area or right outside it, the conditions in the Run can be used to describe those in other, more distant coal camps farther afield. A coal camp during the early 1930s

was a depressing thing to observe and a soul-crushing place in which to live. Even the slag piles strewn everywhere on the valley floor seemed designed to accentuate the misery; without fail they ignited and burned, their foul-smelling smoke mixing with the winter fog to create a thick, chill, stinking cloak that smothered the vegetation.¹⁰⁸ “December in the coal mining camp at Osage was rarely pretty,”¹⁰⁹ remembered Sidney D. Lee. The town boasted a slag pile over 50 acres in size.¹¹⁰

And everywhere the noise of the tipples¹¹¹ and the endless lines of coal cars slowly rumbling up and down the length of the hollow, and the wind spreading coal dust into everything and everywhere. All accounts from the period mention the coal dust, the entire world was painted gray to black with it, and the smallest crack in a wall would see it “come to darken the furniture and walls in the shanty.”¹¹²

Besides the coal dust, the mostly unpaved roads throughout the area exacerbated the task of maintaining a clean household. Osage town in the Run had unpaved, muddy streets and wooden boards for sidewalks.¹¹³ Historian Frances Hensley recalls the ubiquitous dirt as “one of the greatest enemies women who lived in the coal camps had.”¹¹⁴ To keep a house clean required an almost superhuman effort, even in a home without cracks between the wallboards and holes in the roof.

The profusion of dirt in the camps was rather common in rural America back in the 1920s. Most of the advances in cleaning tools, such as the vacuum cleaner and washing machine, were useless without electricity. Only one-third of Americans had electricity in their houses at the time,¹¹⁵ and the majority of them were concentrated in the cities and larger towns. During the 1920s, the difference in cleanliness of the urban versus the rural American was rather wide; in fact you could smell it.¹¹⁶ While Morgantown and its power company were nearby, even those miners’ shacks in Scotts Run wired for electricity made no difference, as the poverty-stricken inhabitants couldn’t afford to pay utility bills.

Nor was there any indoor plumbing, and it was usual for multiple families to share a common outdoor latrine.¹¹⁷ “Camp residences were noteworthy more for the speed with which they were constructed than for comfort.”¹¹⁸ Sidney D. Lee recalls that his family’s first home when they moved to Scotts Run was in a row house of completely bare rooms that had once been used to house company pack mules. There were

10 apartments for 10 families, and four outdoor latrines for all of them to share.¹¹⁹

It was the housing situation that helped spark much bloodshed between the miners and the operators. Despite the surge in hard-paved roads and private ownership of automobiles, the coal miners of the Run for the most part did not own cars and did not commute to the mine; many lived in company housing.¹²⁰

Evictions were a common complaint of miners, who saw it as being thrown from their home. The coal companies, however, pointed out that the house was not the property of the miner but of the company, and striking miners were no longer employed so they needed to be removed from the house. Arguments like this led to gunfights such as took place at Matewan. Certainly the manner in which the coal operators tended to toss striking miners and their families into the street did not help.¹²¹

The individual stories of an eviction depict why emotions could get worked up to a fever pitch, however correct the act may have been from a legal and moral point of view. A missionary witnessed one during a cold January in 1932. The Bates family, parents and six children, were thrown out of the Pursglove Mine company house they lived in because he was no longer employed by that firm. With a reputation as a “good for nothing” that was probably reinforced by the fact that Bates made no effort at all to vacate the premises despite repeated demands to do so, the company sent over three agents who “picked up everything and dumped it out of the road,”¹²² where it sat in the rain and open air. The youngest of Bates’s children was two months old.

As early as 1925, life in many coal camps had deteriorated to the extent that Idaho senator Frank Gooding exclaimed “conditions which exist in the strike torn regions of the Pittsburgh district are a blot upon American civilization.”¹²³ By 1933, investigations by the *Christian Century* (which had the best reports of conditions in the coal fields) still found “cold, bleak, dirty, and forbidding” the best adjectives to describe what its reporters witnessed. “Large families crowded into a few small rooms, grime, destitution, and ugliness everywhere.”¹²⁴

There were a few bright spots, an oasis here and there, such as in the Rockefeller-owned mines of the Consolidated Coal Company. It

was a nonunion mine, which not only paid higher wages¹²⁵ than the UMWA agreement called for but had relatively decent housing and medical care.¹²⁶ Overwhelmingly, though, a coal camp offered nothing but crushing poverty and hopelessness.

One writer from that time observed about the residents of Scotts Run: "How can the families manage to live? Mostly by a reduction of living standards to as low a point as not to seem those of humans."¹²⁷ Glenna Williams asked, "What can you do when there is nothing? We were on the brink of some kind of catastrophe." Being on the brink was a step up, as there were many who had long ago fallen off it. Entire families slept together on the bare floor of whatever abandoned shack they called home and bedded down with newspapers as mattresses and blankets.¹²⁸

Newspapers served as a crude form of insulation as well. The miners packed it into cracks between the wallboards or, at times, used it for decorative purposes as wallpaper.¹²⁹ With no means to purchase clothing, entire families were literally walking around in rags—and it took a heavy toll in sickness, especially among the children, many of whom went about barefoot.¹³⁰

One social worker recorded the housing conditions of a hilltop camp she investigated, and her report gives some hint as to the effect poverty was having on the people of the camps:

*In the little section of _____ Hill, there are twelve houses near together. None of them are fit to live in, hardly fit for animals. There are sixteen families in those houses. They all report the place as overrun with rats at times. There are six toilets in the group. Drinking (alcohol) was reported by the people themselves in all the families but two. Ten of the families had one or more members in jail. The doctors warned . . . almost everyone has some sort of social disease.*¹³¹

A journalist came across one moribund camp where the coal miners had for the past 18 months been working two or three days a week at most. Their families were already suffering from the lack of food and clothing. Right before the journalist's arrival, the mine had closed for good. With the steep mountainsides all about like the sides of a coffin, the town had a "general atmosphere of silence—like a funeral."¹³²

All the social ills history has recorded as riding hand in hand with poverty put in their appearance. Contemporary accounts from the people who worked among them made no effort to absolve the miners for whatever moral and character failings they may have displayed, and they displayed them all—except for one important difference. I came across but rare mention of promiscuity and none of divorce, single-parent households, or illegitimate children. In fact, it seems that quite the opposite occurred: Families clung even closer to one another, observers reporting “the miner, his wife, and their four to fourteen children have a family solidarity that is very real.”¹³³

The people who lived in Scotts Run were no saints. Above all, it seems, alcohol was the primary indulgence. Alcohol abuse certainly contributed to another problem that was widely noted in the Run: domestic violence. Passing on stories that her mother had imparted to her, Bettijane Burger, the daughter of Mary Behner, relates that when payday arrived for the miners, some would “go to the store and buy a lot of liquor and they would take that out on their families.”¹³⁴

The profligate nature of many in Scotts Run was remarked on as well, and this attitude against frugality and saving for a rainy day stood them in marked contrast to those who had once farmed the area. In 1932, a *New York Times* report for the coal fields thought it notable how, a scant month after a mine would shut down, “every miner [would be] penniless.”¹³⁵ The installment plan was the undoing for many a mining family, they viewed the salesman “as the personification of the boom,” and they resented the one who had formally ridden up with smiles and radios returning later to take it all back.¹³⁶

One account recalled a miner’s family living in a “run down” shack yet having a \$70 radio that they still owed \$50 on. “It’s the only pleasure we have,” the housewife explained, and there it remained amid the hungry squalor, a musical reminder of better days long gone.¹³⁷

Misery beyond Description: Private Charity in Scotts Run

That thou wilt do unto the least of thy brothers, thou doest unto me.

—Holy Bible

The Great Depression fell upon the people of West Virginia with a ferocity almost unmatched elsewhere across these United States.¹³⁸ Already devastated by the bloody, drawn-out collapse of the coal bubble, the miners were ill prepared for the addition of a countrywide economic calamity.

The miners of Scotts Run were a proud people, ashamed and humiliated to be reduced to beggary. "Often they were literally starving, but they 'hated to ask.'"¹³⁹ They had little choice as to whether to turn away the extended helping hand; annual coal production had dropped for all of West Virginia from 145 million tons in 1927 to 83 million in 1932.¹⁴⁰ By that later date, most of the miners in the Run had not known steady employment for years.¹⁴¹

Exacerbating the economic disaster in West Virginia was the fallout from the massive fraud put over on the West Virginian people by the state's banking community. In the three years from 1929 to 1932, the number of West Virginian banks fell by 33 percent, taking along with them over \$100 million worth of their depositors' money, this from a starting base of \$328 million.¹⁴² At that time Americans used gold for money, not pieces of paper, and the West Virginian people were shocked to find that their local bankers had been issuing pieces of paper with absolutely no money (gold) to back up what the paper promised. It was, hands down, the greatest bank robbery in West Virginian history—pulled off by the bankers themselves.

Monongalia County was not immune to the fraud. Every single bank in the county closed down, taking with them all the tax receipts used for poor relief.¹⁴³ Tax revenues continued to fall into 1933, straining the system even further. In the early days, long before the better-known and famous Quakers and Eleanor Roosevelt entered the field to help, local charities, religious missionaries, and the coal-mining companies were plowing through the misery, doing whatever they could to help.

Much has been written over the years denigrating the coal companies with a broad brush; much of the criticism is well deserved, as for example the policy of paying the miners in company script. Yet it would be simplistic and incorrect to assume that every coal-mining company and its owners were little more than American versions of

Ebenezer Scrooge. Many, in fact, gave valuable help for the welfare of the destitute miners.

The homage paid to the coal-mining companies by both journalists and social workers was too widely stated to be discounted. Even the *Christian Century*, most damning in its coverage of what was happening in Scotts Run, granted that “many of the coal companies have been as generous as could be with the men, even when they could pay no rent.”¹⁴⁴ As an example, it was noted that the Crown Mine owners, despite the fact they had closed down operations, did not evict any of the workers who squatted in the company houses.¹⁴⁵

The missionary Mary Behner was able to open “The Shack” (the focal point of her relief efforts) because the building was given to her by the Pursglove Mining Company. Clarence Pickett from the American Friends Service Committee and Bushrod Grimes from West Virginia University’s garden program singled out the coal operators for providing the operational funds for much good work.¹⁴⁶ It was the locally based company, those with owners who lived in the area and knew firsthand what was happening, who were “especially helpful,”¹⁴⁷ even going so far as to try to find other positions outside the industry for the miners they let go.¹⁴⁸

Of the 50,000 or so people living in Monongalia County by the early 1930s, it is estimated that around 15,000 lived in the coal-mining sections, which is where the most extreme cases of poverty were concentrated. The resources of the local charitable agencies were crushed by the weight of the indigent coal miners and their children; almost 40 percent of the young were suffering from malnutrition.¹⁴⁹

The most prominent of the charitable organizations was the Council of Social Agencies, which coordinated and worked with the local American Legion, Salvation Army, American Red Cross, and later the American Friends Service Committee (AFSE). Volunteer workers and “the anonymous generosity of many citizens” funded the entire machine.¹⁵⁰

Two early prototypes of religious-based private charity in Scotts Run drew their ideas from two sources—on one side the Bible School Movement, on the other the Settlement House Movement. The former would tend to the earthly necessities of the “religiously needy” while turning them to God; the latter would tend to the earthly needs of the

newly arrived immigrants while turning them to the American flag. Both did much to help alleviate the suffering.¹⁵¹

The Settlement House was established in the Run in 1922, and would offer a program of services that included “naturalization, cooking, motherhood, and other skills.”¹⁵² While the Bible School Movement got a relatively late start—1928—it would gain greater fame due to the dogged energy and pluck of a young missionary named Mary Behner, who would oversee the program from its inception until she left in 1937.

A graduate of Ohio’s Wooster College and daughter of a Presbyterian minister, she originally had wished to work as a foreign missionary but was persuaded by the Board of Missions of that denomination to work instead in West Virginia’s northern coal fields. She would keep a series of diaries, leaving behind an intimate record of the people and events in Scotts Run. A remarkable young woman with courage to spare, she “rebuked the coal industry, the operators, the churches, and the Scotts Run residents themselves.”¹⁵³

Originally asked to begin a Sunday school program for the area children, while making her rounds amid the grinding poverty she realized “that there was a community beyond the Sunday school that she had to do something about,”¹⁵⁴ and she would spend the next nine years of her life doing something about it. The most prominent result of her tireless charitable impulse was a building in the town of Pursglove that would be known as The Shack.

Donated to her in 1932 by the Pursglove Mining Company,¹⁵⁵ the building was once a horse stable, a meat storage locker, and now the center of Behner’s charitable efforts, the home for her nursery school, child feeding station, library, shower baths, Bible classes, and even the occasional movie.¹⁵⁶ Like everyone who lived in the Run, she found that “because of the coal dust it is very difficult to keep clean.”¹⁵⁷ Despite an operating budget that often was nothing at all, she displayed an admirable resourcefulness. She ran up and down the Run gathering discarded powder boxes to use as seats;¹⁵⁸ eventually able to seat 175 people at a time, she offered the UMWA the space for union meetings. (An offer it gratefully accepted). She began feedings for the children six days a week, exulting, “The twenty-four children that have been having these lunches have gained in a marvelous way.”¹⁵⁹

Behner's blunt assessment of the miners and the habits they displayed are of particular interest. She was adamant that she would not make The Shack "a spoon-fed affair," charging the children a nickel each to join the library and to use the shower baths.¹⁶⁰ She derided handouts as "so called charity" and declared them "an outworn method . . . which has already so pauperized these people."¹⁶¹ She also noted the profligate ways of the spendthrift miners, "rarely is there (one) who plans and saves. They have learned not their lesson from the depression."¹⁶²

Laziness to her was a cardinal sin, and she lamented, "A lot of the men not working are those who choose not to work because they are lazy, or do not work because they cannot get along with 'the boss.'"¹⁶³ She found it frustrating that it was a long, laborious process to convince people to "better themselves," and her chagrin at the unwillingness of many unemployed miners to pitch in and help fairly leaps out of her diary.¹⁶⁴

Despite her private misgivings and disappointments in what she saw of the miners in Scotts Run, she had a fondness for many of them. One entry in her diary is telling when she angrily relates her disgust with a resident of Morgantown who insisted that not all the youth of the Run "should be encouraged to follow higher lives—some should be encouraged to be good maids."¹⁶⁵

Her daughter recalls that "she never really got any hostility from the people out there,"¹⁶⁶ which is mostly true, except for one moment in August 1937. There would be one final moment, a "nightmare" in her own words, that would close out Behner's time in the Run. A few articles published in the *Wooster Voice* (written by some college students she had invited to work at The Shack) were the catalyst. Seeing the conditions around them, they had written an exposé of the poverty. The residents of the Run somehow got hold of the paper and were outraged, feeling it was a slander.

She wrote to her parents "nine years of giving everything to the people of Scotts Run—to be put on trial—accused—hissed at—slandered, defended by not even my friends." Heartbroken, she had to endure "the petty things brought up. A person can make a lot of mistakes in nine years. What a closing dramatic chapter to my work."¹⁶⁷

As the 1930s began to age, while she was grateful as other organizations arrived to pitch in to help the miners, she felt that "as so many

programs came in, she began to see a sense of dependency. "They would just . . . not really think about living their own lives and being in charge of their own lives."¹⁶⁸ By 1937, it appears that she had grown weary under the load of endless toil, with no end in sight. She had put off her own life for long enough. In the spring of that year, she accepted the marriage proposal of David A. Christopher, an employee of West Virginia University.¹⁶⁹ One year later, she married and was no longer part of the Presbyterian missionary work in Scotts Run.

Now in a new home, The Shack is still standing, and to this day the charitable programs begun long ago by Mary Behner still serve the people of Scotts Run.¹⁷⁰

American Friends Service Committee

The situation was a depressing one to walk into.

—Clarence Pickett (AFSC chief) on Scotts Run¹⁷¹

Clarence Pickett came into the world the youngest of eight children in 1884, his home part of a Quaker colony in the farmland about 80 miles south of Chicago. His family was part of the Friends since his youth, he records that a sister was sent to Tokyo as a teacher in 1892, and the religiosity of his surroundings was "deep and genuine."¹⁷² After meeting his future wife at college, they delayed marriage until his graduation from Hartford Theological Seminary, after which he taught biblical literature from 1922 to 1929.

In that latter year, he "was astonished to receive an invitation to become executive secretary"¹⁷³ of the Quaker's charitable organization, the American Friends Service Committee, an enterprise justly famous for its relief work in war-torn Europe in the period right after World War I.¹⁷⁴ He accepted the position, and it would soon enough have him working with other victims of that same war.

The series of events that would lead the AFSC into the Scotts Run coal fields (and the surrounding areas) was put into motion by the Council of Social Agencies, which had appealed for help to the federal United States Children's Bureau. That bureau had already (in early 1931) been tasked by President Hoover to investigate the conditions

of the children in the coal-mining camps of the Allegheny and Blue Ridge mountains.¹⁷⁵ The initial reports began to filter back—horrific.

Soon thereafter Grace Abbott, chief of the Children's Bureau, was the distinguished speaker for a gala reception at Bryn Mawr College.¹⁷⁶ By chance (or maybe not), Rufus Jones, part of the AFSC's leadership, was seated right next to her. During a friendly chat, she said, "Dr. Jones, I wish your service committee could do something to save the lives of my children"¹⁷⁷—meaning that "President Hoover had suggested that . . . the AFSC might undertake to feed the children."¹⁷⁸

This was quickly followed up by a visit to the AFSC's Philadelphia headquarters from Fred Croxton, acting chairman of the President's Emergency Committee on Employment. Accompanied by Abbott, they pleaded with the AFSC's board of directors to enter the coal fields. This made sense on a number of levels, as the AFSC had on its roster people with extensive experience in large-scale charitable operations and had undertaken exactly this sort of work in the South Wales coal fields of Great Britain.¹⁷⁹ Even more to the point, as reported from the minutes of an AFSC meeting held not too long after, "there is no one else to do it."¹⁸⁰

The leadership of the AFSC did not immediately jump at the chance to accede to President Hoover's request. This would be an immense undertaking, and Pickett admitted, "I knew little about the bituminous coalfields of this country."¹⁸¹ The AFSC tentatively agreed to move into the coal camps for a two-year period, yet it knew from experience the ease to take on a project was often exceeded by the difficulty in ending it.¹⁸² The organization needed to husband its scarce resources.

On June 4, 1931, a Coal Committee was created to study what areas would be the main focus of relief efforts, with Clarence Pickett picking Monongalia County for "the possibility of a clear-cut piece of child feeding."¹⁸³ The AFSC admitted in all candor that many other areas could have been chosen besides Scotts Run; for example, nearby Marion County "had some isolated mines as bad as those in Scotts Run."¹⁸⁴

Although conditions in Scotts Run were vile, it was known that "there are in some cases more intense stories to be told about other communities. Conditions in Kentucky were particularly grim and

challenging.”¹⁸⁵ In Kanawha County south of Scotts Run, the devastation in the coal fields was exacerbated by severe flooding and, in the county’s northern area, drought.¹⁸⁶ The AFSC leadership could have thrown a dart at a map of West Virginia, chosen the area hit, and doubtless would have found plenty of hungry mouths to feed.

Drawing on its deeply experienced roster, the AFSC appointed Professor Homer L. Morris of Fisk University field director of the coal field operations, a good choice as he had served with the committee in Germany, Poland, and Russia.¹⁸⁷ The project was almost stillborn as it was hoped the Red Cross would grant a large sum of money to fund it, but that organization “did not feel this particular service lay within their province.” Hoover rode to the rescue, giving the AFSC \$225,000 in taxpayer money, payable in 10 monthly installments.¹⁸⁸

With the organizational structure in place and money in hand, the AFSC began yet another foray into its specialty: helping to clean up the sad aftermath of World War I.

In the Thick of It All

Brave attempts at relief are being made in many places.

—From *The Christian Century* (1932)¹⁸⁹

The AFSC program officially opened on September 30, 1931,¹⁹⁰ when the AFSC, after a careful study of the situation in Monongalia County, opened 24 feeding stations therein, fully half of them in Scotts Run.¹⁹¹ With barely 10 percent or so of the county’s population in the Run, that fact alone highlights the depths to which the coal camp residents had sunk. The private charities were a godsend for the people, as the public welfare till was empty.

Investigators for the Friends had collected their observations of the camps, and the results were mind numbing. Almost all the children had “remediable illnesses, including malnutrition, enlarged tonsils, defective vision, and decayed teeth.”¹⁹² When given toothbrushes, many of the children had not the slightest idea how to use them and had to be taught.¹⁹³

The feeding program, which due to financial constraints and the vast size of the destitute population was offered only to children and pregnant women, quickly ramped up, and “within five months 40,000 children a day were being fed in 563 communities.”¹⁹⁴ Besides Monongalia County, feeding stations were established in the southern coal fields of West Virginia, in Kanawha, Mingo, and Logan counties, as well as areas of Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois.¹⁹⁵ Fifty-five men and women drove their secondhand cars across 35 counties (into areas poorly served by roads) to deliver the food.¹⁹⁶

During the first phase of its time in the fields, the AFSC held fast to a “10 percent standard,” meaning that for children to qualify, they had to weigh in at least 10 percent below the average standard for age and height. The overwhelming majority of children in Scotts Run had no problem passing that benchmark. In the town of Cassville, 70 percent of the children qualified; in Bertha Hill, 80 percent did so.¹⁹⁷

The peak number fed daily was reached in April 1932, with 40,000 children per day on average using the feeding stations throughout the multistate area. A program to dispense milk to preschoolers and expectant mothers was instituted as well.¹⁹⁸ It was a large-scale operational undertaking, and the fact that it was pulled off at all is a testament to the professionalism and goodwill of all those who took part in it.

During a two-month stretch in the summer of 1932, the AFSC shut down its operations in the fields. West Virginian state officials were very anxious to have the Friends return for the coming winter and offered “funds which [they] could borrow from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation” for the purpose.¹⁹⁹ The AFSC agreed to return, and during the 1932–1933 school year in Monongalia County, “over 5,000 children were fed daily through the Friend’s feeding program.”²⁰⁰

Relief workers in the coal fields had to be aware at all times that the people of the camps, although desperate for help, would not accept it “unless the helpers stepped gingerly around the sensitive spots of pride and independence.”²⁰¹ One contemporary noted of the coal miners: “Fairy tales and feuds occupy the minds of these people. The stranger must walk warily if he is to live among them.”²⁰² The miners could react strongly to slights to manhood or what they believed to be underhanded dealing on the part of others, especially outsiders. That feeling of pride extended even to the local charity workers, one of whom

admitted, "I am ashamed to see outside people like the Quakers, nice as they are, come into West Virginia to help the needy miners; it hurts my state pride."²⁰³

The AFSC encountered the same problem that other, earlier charities faced when working in the Run—the lack of clothing that kept too many children at home. Ironically, it was those very children, bound to their homes by a lack of shoes and dressed in rags, that most needed to reach the feeding stations.²⁰⁴ Seeing this, the AFSC collected over 150 tons of used clothing from donors, refurbished and issued it to the miners' children.²⁰⁵

Working in tandem was the West Virginia University's garden program (run by Bushrod Grimes), and AFSC canning facilities were set up in church basements where professors' and miners' wives worked to preserve the surplus fruit and vegetables that the program provided.²⁰⁶ Grimes, who would go on to play a large part in the initial stages of Arthurdale, ran "the best organized subsistence garden program," and he credited the AFSC for providing valuable help in making it such a success.²⁰⁷ In 1933 alone, the surplus food was estimated to be worth almost \$60,000, and Grimes's work, and similar efforts by the other 33 garden clubs in Monongalia County, did much to fight hunger.²⁰⁸

One of the more interesting programs begun by the Friends involved the hiring of a furniture maker named Isaac Samuel Godlove to supervise a cooperative shop. Funded by a donation of \$10,000 from the Elmhirst Fund,²⁰⁹ it allowed a select group of miners to be taught the trade and, it was hoped, turn a profit. Initially located at Crown Mine in a building donated for the purpose by the coal company, although the cooperative never turned a profit,²¹⁰ it would eventually grow to fame as the Mountaineer Craftsmen's Cooperative Association (MCCA) and be relocated to Arthurdale. The Godlove chair it made would become renowned throughout the eastern seaboard, and it had a well-earned reputation for quality craftsmanship.

As massive as the AFSC effort was, everything added together—the feeding, the co-ops, the clothing drives, and the garden programs—were like a drop of water in a desert. The need was so great, so many of a tightly packed population was destitute that "to feed a child and let his parents go hungry [was] a harsh reality which the Quakers [had to] face."²¹¹ Pickett compared it all to "trying to sweep back the

ocean.”²¹² While one could, and did, see “children eagerly eat their porridge or drink their allowance of milk, or become silent with ecstasy over a pair of second-hand shoes,”²¹³ standing behind that one was a crowd of other children, hungry and shoeless.

To those involved, the solution seemed to rest in one place—with the federal government. As Pickett despaired at coping with the flood of misery that made the AFSC’s huge operation seem feeble in comparison to the need, “the social application of religious faith was beginning to be the focus of much of [his] attention.”²¹⁴ Or, as the investigative journalist James Myer called out in the pages of the *Christian Century*, “only federal government action can save it now.”²¹⁵

And somewhere to the north, that very federal government was motoring toward them by auto in the form of a relief investigator named Lorena Hickok. Following close behind, descending from Washington like the Good Witch from *The Wizard of Oz*, would be none other than Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of America’s new president, FDR.

The federal government would soon arrive in Scotts Run, bringing in its wake consequences felt to this day.

